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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the impact of teachers' use of immediacy behaviors in the college classroom. Behavior patterns of teachers often affect the behavior patterns of students. Teacher immediacy has been found to positively impact student cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. Subjects, 70 students, enrolled in a communication course in a community college located in the southwestern region of the United States, volunteered to complete a questionnaire during class. Results indicated that 12 teacher immediacy behaviors were considered to be effective and important to the college students, with humor ranked as the most effective and physical touch as the least effective. (Contains 45 references and 2 tables of data. The questionnaire is attached.) (Author/RS)

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Teacher Immediacy: What Students Consider
to be Effective Teacher Behaviors

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of teachers' use of immediacy behaviors in the college classroom. Behavior patterns of teachers often affect the behavior patterns of students. Teacher immediacy has been found to positively impact student cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. The purpose of this study was to identify specific immediacy behaviors and their order of importance to college students. Results indicated that twelve teacher immediacy behaviors were considered to be effective and important to college students. According to this study, the use of humor was ranked as the most effective and physical touch was ranked as the least.

Teacher Immediacy: What Students Consider
to be Effective Teacher Behaviors

The role of the instructor in any classroom is both simple and complex. Effective teachers promote student learning. That is simple enough. The complexity comes into play when teachers decide upon avenues in which to promote learning. According to Bloom (1956), promoting student learning involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes. Professors can possibly bring about changes in each domain through certain behaviors they exhibit before, during, and after class.

During the past decade, teacher immediacy has been the focus of a great deal of instructional communication research. The concept of immediacy stems from the work of Mehrabian (1967) who characterizes immediacy as the behaviors which reduce physical and psychological distance between interactants and enhances closeness to one another. Researchers have extended the immediacy concept and applied it to the classroom and specifically to teacher communication (Andersen, 1979; Neuliep, 1995).

The focus of this research has been on teachers' use of the verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors and their impact on students. Verbal and nonverbal immediacy have been associated with increases in student affective learning (Anderson, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Frymier, 1994; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990), behavioral intent (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993a; Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988), and cognitive learning (Gorham,

1988; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995).

After examining the vast amount of research concerning teacher immediacy, it seems fair to say that teacher immediacy is a positive teaching strategy that can be learned and used by teachers everywhere. Although research proves that teacher immediacy increases affective and cognitive learning, student learning is a secondary effect of teacher immediacy. The primary effect of teacher immediacy is student motivation. Motivation acts as a mediating variable between teacher immediacy and student learning (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993b; Richmond, 1990).

Interpersonal perceptions and communicative relationships between college instructors and students are crucial to the teaching-learning process, and the degree of immediacy between instructors and students is an important variable in those relationships (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988). Therefore, the focus of this study is to identify both verbal and nonverbal immediate behaviors preformed by teachers and discuss the effectiveness of these behaviors in the college classroom.

Motivation

What does the term "motivation" mean? One technical definition describes motivation as the extent to which certain stimuli, objects, or events effect the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the behavior in question (Usova & Gibson, 1986). More simply, motivation can be defined as exciting the mind of the student to receive the instruction. Excitement, interest,

and enthusiasm toward learning are the primary objectives of motivation.

Student motivation is a major problem in college classrooms today. Many students are bored, inattentive, and unable to see much connection between schoolwork and their lives outside the classroom. Their boredom diminishes attention, lowers achievement, and is a likely reason for dropping out of school (Hootstein, 1994).

Most college professors would agree that motivated students are easier to teach, and that the students who are interested in learning do learn more. Motivation has been defined in various ways, but the concept of motivation always in some way refers to what students do. Motivation comes from a variety of forces which operate both from within and without the student's mind. The real challenge to the teacher is to become a positive motivational force in order to promote learning, retention, and a positive self-esteem.

One effective way instructors can motivate students is by engaging in immediacy behaviors. Teacher immediacy behaviors arouse students, which directs their attention and enhances their motivation, which in turn increases learning (Christophel & Gorham, 1995).

Teacher Immediacy

Research indicates that immediate teachers are viewed by students as being more positive and effective, which, in turn, leads to increased affect toward the instructor and the course

(Anderson, 1979; Anderson, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Anderson & Withrow, 1981; Gorham, 1988). West (1994) claims that teacher immediacy behaviors are critical in student learning, that students consistently respond positively to immediacy behaviors, and that teacher-student relationships can be enhanced by the integration of immediacy behaviors. It is reasonable to argue, then, that teachers who employ immediate behaviors are promoting positive academic experiences with their students.

Nonverbal

Much of the research on teacher immediacy has focused on nonverbal cues and indicates that immediacy does increase teaching effectiveness. Nonverbal cues which have been identified as immediate include: friendliness or smiling, gesturing or a dynamic delivery, eye contact with students, decreased physical distance with students, socially appropriate touch, vocal variation and vocal expressiveness, professional physical appearance, and spending time with students before and after class (Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995; Frymier, 1993a; Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991; McCroskey et al., 1995; Neuliep, 1995; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990).

Several significant theories have emerged throughout the past decade concerning nonverbal immediacy and its benefits in the college classroom. Nonverbal immediacy increases student motivation to learn and, in turn, increases student cognitive learning, and information recall (Allen & Shaw, 1990; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Powell & Harville,

1990). Not only does nonverbal immediacy increase affective learning (Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Stewart & Wheelless, 1987), but nonverbal immediacy also increases students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness (Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Butland & Beebe, 1992; Collier & Powell, 1990; Sorensen, 1989). Additionally, nonverbal teacher immediacy plays a mediating role in the reception and effectiveness of teacher control strategies (Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985; Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988).

Verbal

Development of the immediacy construct is generally defined in terms of nonverbal behaviors, but it has recently been extended to verbal channels as well (Fusani, 1994). The words a professor uses can signal approach or openness for communication as well as avoidance. Typical verbal immediacy behaviors include: addressing students by name, using humor, using personal examples, initiating willingness to become engaged in conversations with students before, after, or outside of class, and inclusiveness (using "we" and "our" vs. "I" and "my") (Ellis, 1995; Frymier, 1993a; Frymier, 1994; Montgomery, 1981; Neuliep, 1995; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990).

Many significant theories have recently emerged concerning the advantages of using verbal immediacy behaviors as effective teacher behaviors in the college classroom. In addition to increasing student cognitive learning (Christophel, 1990; Gorham

& Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990), verbal teacher immediacy also increases student affective and behavioral learning (Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Powell & Harville, 1990; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Both, verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy is significantly and positively related to perceptions of teacher clarity (Powell & Harville, 1990). Likewise, teacher immediacy produces a reciprocal liking among teacher and student (Chaiken, Gillen, Derlega, Heinen, & Wilson, 1978; Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986).

Based on previous research, a direct correlation exists between teacher immediacy behaviors and teacher effectiveness. In an effort to more fully understand which verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors are considered effective by college students, the following research question was generated:

RQ1: Which teacher immediacy behaviors do college students consider to be effective.

Methods

Subjects

Seventy students enrolled in communication courses in a community college located in the southwestern region of the United States volunteered to participate by filling out a questionnaire during class. No credit was given. Participants were first asked demographics such as age, gender, and classification.

Ages ranged from 18 to 44 with a mean of 19. Thirty-five of

the subjects were male, and thirty-five were female. Approximately 62% of the sample were freshmen, 36% were sophomores, 1% were juniors, and 1% were seniors. The ethnic background of the subjects was as follows: 10% Mexican-American, 10% African-American, 1% Asian, and 79% Caucasian. This course is a required course for all majors, therefore, students represented a diversity of major fields.

Procedures

An author-generated questionnaire was administered to each subject measuring the effectiveness of teacher immediacy behaviors (See Appendix A). This measurement instrument measured the effectiveness of eight nonverbal teacher immediacy behaviors: eye contact, dynamic delivery, physical appearance, friendliness or smiling, vocal variation, time spent outside of class, appropriate touch, and physical distance, and four verbal teacher immediacy behaviors: use of humor, learning student names, using words like "our" and "we", and using personal examples. The teacher immediacy/motivation instrument is a five-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from (1) "strongly agree" to (5) "strongly disagree."

The measurement instrument consisted of two questions each for all twelve immediacy behaviors. Results of the survey indicated that it has high reliability. Students that agreed with one question, agreed with the same question worded differently. Also, if a student agreed with one question, they disagreed with the same question that was worded negatively.

The measurement instrument was based on a study conducted by Gorham in 1988 in which she identified the relationship between immediacy behaviors and learning. Based on the literature review and previous studies, this measurement instrument has face validity. It measures those behaviors which it claims to measure.

Results

All seventy questionnaires generated by the students were used to tabulate the results. Since the measurement instrument consisted of two questions on each of twelve immediacy behaviors, answers to both of the questions dealing with the same behavior were averaged together. Those questions that were worded negatively were recoded.

Descriptive statistics revealed that most of the students sampled in this study agreed that teacher immediacy behaviors increase teacher effectiveness to some degree. The majority of respondents strongly agreed (1) or agreed (2) that each behavior tested was important and effective.

Insert Table 1 about here

The immediacy behaviors were ranked as to which ones the students considered the most motivating. The rankings were as follows: (1) humor, (2) dynamic delivery, (3) vocal variation, (4) personal examples, (5) friendly, (6) eye contact, (7) time outside of class, (8) using "our" and "we", (9) learn student names, (10) physical distance, (11) physical appearance, and (12)

appropriate touch. The results of the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows the rank order of the immediacy behaviors identified in the study.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

This study provides an initial step in determining which verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors college students consider to be the most effective. Results indicate that the mean of every immediacy behavior tested was considered to have a positive impact on teacher effectiveness (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993b; Richmond, 1990). Since over 98% of the students surveyed were either freshmen or sophomores, one possible interpretation is that beginning college students require more immediacy from an instructor than more mature junior and senior students. Another interpretation could be that community college students require more immediacy from the instructor than university students. Since this study was not preformed on juniors and seniors or university students, this would be one direction that should be pursued in future research.

Another important aspect of this study is that the nonverbal immediacy behavior of physical touch was ranked as the least effective by students. Professors at the college level appear to touch their students so infrequently that this should not be considered a dominating immediacy behavior (McCroskey, Richmond,

Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995).

It should be noted, however, that touch is viewed as unacceptable by many students and many cultures. Learning how students evaluate descriptions of instructor immediacy behaviors is vital in order to eliminate the remote chance that immediacy could be misinterpreted as sexual harassment (Mongeau & Blalock, 1994). This is an important issue because immediacy and harassment involve similar behaviors but generate drastically different outcomes. Due to the implications involved, physical touch is one immediacy behavior that college professors should try hard not to incorporate into their behavior.

Although this study does not directly link teacher immediacy to cognitive learning or motivation as research suggests (Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990), it does link teacher immediacy to effective teacher behaviors. According to Cashin (1979), immediacy behaviors play an important role in motivating students. Therefore, based on this study and literature review, this author concludes that immediacy is linked to effective teaching.

An interesting finding in this study is that the students ranked dynamic delivery second and physical appearance did not seem very important to these students. Results also indicate that students ranked humor as the most efficient teacher immediacy behavior. It is not surprising that the use of humor in the college classroom has emerged as an important aspect of teacher

immediacy (Gorham, 1988). According to Cosner (1959) humor and laughter are indeed like an invitation, it aims at decreasing social distance.

Research suggests that humor is capable of improving student perceptions of the teacher (Scott, 1976), facilitating teacher/student rapport (Welker, 1977), enhancing perceptions of competence, delivery, and appeal (Gorham & Christophel, 1990), perceived intelligence (Gruner, 1966), friendliness (Gruner & Lampton, 1972), and character (Gruner, 1967). Sprowl (1987) discusses various functions of humor in facilitating self-disclosure, alleviating boredom, and gaining favor through self-enhancement.

What are the practical implications of this research for college professors? With the exception of physical touch, immediacy can be recommended to teachers with greater confidence that it will indeed increase the effectiveness of their teaching. Both verbal and nonverbal immediacy is clearly a useful tool in the college classroom for enhancing teacher effectiveness. When teachers become more effective, then increased learning will result.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire

The Effects of Teacher Immediacy

DIRECTIONS: Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you:

- 1--strongly agree
- 2--agree
- 3--are undecided
- 4--disagree
- 5--strongly disagree

- ____ 1. I tend to pay attention when an instructor makes eye contact with me.
- ____ 2. I want to listen to instructors who use gestures, movement, and who have a dynamic delivery.
- ____ 3. I lose interest in attending classes taught by instructors who are sloppy in their appearance.
- ____ 4. I look forward to going to classes when the instructor uses humor frequently.
- ____ 5. I feel comfortable in a class where the instructor smiles and is friendly.
- ____ 6. It is hard for me to listen to an instructor who talks in a monotone.
- ____ 7. I tend to work harder in classes in which the instructor has learned my name.
- ____ 8. I daydream in classes when an instructor fails to use good eye contact.
- ____ 9. I get bored when an instructor lectures using few gestures or movements.
- ____ 10. Vocal variation and vocal expressiveness in instructors aid in holding my attention.
- ____ 11. When an instructor spends time with me outside of class (stays late and comes early), I tend to skip that class less than other classes.
- ____ 12. I am more interested in what instructors say when they dress professionally.

- _____13. I do not like it when an instructor uses humor in the classroom.
- _____14. I feel a sense of belonging when an instructor uses the term "our class."
- _____15. Instructors that pat me on the back or use touch appropriately make me feel comfortable.
- _____16. I tend to pay attention when an instructor walks around the room and decreases the physical distance between himself/herself and the class.
- _____17. I learn more when instructors give personal examples during class discussions.
- _____18. Instructors that smile a lot and are friendly make me nervous.
- _____19. I dislike instructors who do not learn my name.
- _____20. I feel that it is inappropriate for instructors to use personal examples during class.
- _____21. When an instructor touches me, I feel uncomfortable.
- _____22. I think that instructors should keep a physical distance between themselves and their students.
- _____23. I feel uncomfortable when instructors use words like "we" and "our" referring to the class.
- _____24. I think that it is inappropriate for instructors to spend time with students before and after class.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Subject's Reaction to Each Immediacy Behavior, (1)
Being Strongly Agree and (5) Being Strongly Disagree.

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Rank
Nonverbal					
Eye Contact	2.23	.59	1.0	4.0	6
Dynamic Delivery	1.85	.63	1.0	5.0	2
Physical Appearance	2.78	.82	1.0	5.0	11
Friendly and Smile	2.22	.56	1.0	5.0	5
Vocal Variation	1.72	.64	1.0	4.0	3
Time Outside Class	2.28	.71	1.0	5.0	7
Appropriate Touch	2.81	.50	1.0	5.0	12
Physical Distance	2.46	.57	1.0	5.0	10
Verbal					
Humor	1.69	.44	1.0	5.0	1
Learn Names	2.42	.81	1.0	4.0	9
Use "Our" and "We"	2.32	.51	1.0	5.0	8
Personal Examples	1.97	.38	1.0	4.0	4

Table 2

Subjects' Rank of Immediacy Behaviors.

Rank	Teacher Behavior
1	Humor
2	Dynamic Delivery
3	Vocal Variation
4	Personal Examples
5	Friendly
6	Eye Contact
7	Spend Time Outside of Class
8	Use Words Like "Our" and "We"
9	Learn Students Names
10	Physical Distance
11	Physical Appearance
12	Appropriate Touch